

Deep Water

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Summary: The Skyburners ships are inbound to the Dreadnaught. Kho'Urn, a Legionary and Psion Handler, prepares to send his charge into battle.

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Survey Boss Kho'Urn is nervous. The Skyburner assault has begun, and nothing is going to stop it. Not a command, not a plea, not the enormous, wretched, scaly ship his transport is hurtling towards at full impulse. They have to be moving fast if they are going to smash through the Hiveship hull. It is going to be a rough ride. Likely, the transport will rip open, exposing him and the rest of his crew to the alien atmosphere " scans assure there is an atmosphere, not just vacuum " and threatening to eject them all into fire and rubble.

Kho'Urn checks the harness strap that fastens him to the inside of the drop bay. Then he turns as much as the harness allows to check on the tiny figure standing to his left. The little Psion is almost too small to be held by her harness. She is practically swallowed by the lines of Cabal infantry standing shoulder to shoulder in grim, focused silence.

Kho'Urn reaches over and tugs on her harness straps. She turns her slim helm up to him, cocks her head. She sends him an image of her tweaking his nose. He is embarrassing her, and she is censuring him. He tugs the harness strap one more time and affectionately chuffs the underside of her helm with one finger.

Three more Psions stand in their ranks, all of them a good head taller than she. Their Handlers do not pay them any mind.

It is because of her that he is nervous. This is her first mission. For two years, he could not wait for this day. Now he desperately wishes it had not come. Not here, not like this. Not on a mission of certain death.

He isn't afraid of his own death. He's come to terms with it a long time ago. But no matter how hard he tries, he cannot come to terms with losing her.

Of course, she is not afraid. In her excitement, her thoughts keep bleeding into his mind. He sees her youthful imaginings: scouting together, heroic fights with Hive monsters, glories recorded in daily logs. It's endearing, and at the same time he wants to shake her until she's as scared as he is.

The order comes through on the comms: _brace for impact._ The entire line shifts subtly, each unit steeling themselves for what's to come. A countdown begins. When it reaches five, he grips the overhead rail tighter. When it reaches four, he places his other hand on her tiny shoulder.

Three. _Two._ _One â€”

â€” The transport slams into the Dreadnaught hull and the shields scream. Her shoulder slips from his hand. He grabs frantically for her, his whole hand encompassing her torso, holding her steady though her harness still works.

All he can see now, in the roar and shaking, is the memory of an embryo jar being placed in his hands. The tiny, stick-boned Psion tumbling out of the amniotic bio-gel and nestling into his palm. Her mind slamming into his, and her formless infant pleas to care for her. He'd named her Deep Water for her huge, blind, liquid-black eyes staring up at him with infinite depths. He'd moved so carefully for fear he would crush her at the slightest touch.

Now their transport is gouging the innards of the Hiveship. Kho-Urn tries to close his mind. He doesn't want Deep Water to pick up on those memories.

The truth is, he hadn't wanted her. She was tirelessly inquisitive and gave him no privacy. She made him feel like he was crazy, two people in one, unsure of whose thoughts were whose. She invaded his most hidden secrets, picked at memories of his own lost children like she was tearing off scabs. When he grew angry with her, she would jump away and hide in places too small for him to reach. From there, she would mindsend tentative strings of confusion and love until his anger passed, or he fell asleep. Then he would wake and find her curled up in the crook of his elbow.

Other Handlers told him to keep a firm discipline. They warned him of the Psion tendency to pry and prod and puzzle. If he didn't get hold of the situation, she would wring him out. Get her into training after her first month, they said. It will get easier from there.

She took eagerly to the two long years of training. Despite her premature birth from the nursery trauma â€” a faulty generator meant life support lost on a whole gestation group â€” despite her runt status and the bullying it caused from the other Psions, she was strong and healthy. Her mind was needle-sharp and lightning quick.

Despite his best efforts, she wrung him out anyways. And despite his best efforts, he loved her.

Survey Boss Kho'Urn lurches when the transport can no longer crush through another wall. It comes to a sudden stop on its side, throwing the passengers at crazy angles to be caught by their harnesses. The force feels like a Valus punching him in the chest, or maybe that's the force of his fear. The lights go out. Everything is terrifyingly still. He wishes he could feel her heartbeat through his thick glove. Is she all right?

Deep Water sends him an image: she is asleep, curled up in his elbow.

The drop bay door slides open.

End
file.